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ABSTRACT

In this address, Dorothy H. Cohen admonishes teachers tc remain aware that in the classroom they are both teachers and observers trying to find clues to understanding and interaction. Because teachers are human beings with attitudes and beliefs of their own, it is difficult to be objective in making observations of children. An open mind ready to accept anything that there is to see, without judgment, is a prerequisite. Observations of children must begin without any preconceived notions of what one ought to find or will find. Perceptions of children can be influenced by the observer's perscnal associations, moral judgments, age, and physical well-being. Adults must learn to perceive children's behavior first as it is meant, and only secondarily as it is interpreted by adult standards. Body movement is the major language of expression in early childhood and tells more about the meaning of children's behavior than their words. Teachers must learn to read body language to interpret children's developmental stages of competence, experimentation, testing, and general attitudes toward self. (Author/AJ)

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Learning to Observe--Observing to Learn

Dorothy H. Cohen

Address to the NAEYC-AAHPER Conference -- February 1971

I think it was most fortunate, and very good timing, that our meeting yesterday ended on the very sincere question, "Don't teachers observe all the time?" They do indeed, and the keener the observer, the better the teacher. On that we teachers can easily agree.

But teachers are people before, after and during their teacherhood, and the people they are is the source of both their strengths and their weaknesses as teachers.

By contrast, there are also in fields related to ours, researchers. Researchers are blessed in some ways - they can do their observing of children without having to be responsible to them. They are not interrupted by a child who cries, who fights, who answers back, who falls, who needs a tissue, or wants an answer quick. Their observations are at a level of objective dispassionateness that turns teachers off. Yet it is precisely in honing our observations to a sharpness closer to the researcher's that our teaching will become more effective.

PS 004481

The skills of observing children for clues to understanding and interaction are not as readily learned as might be supposed. They can be learned - and have been - but not until teachers have broken with a heritage of educational outlook which seriously interferes with seeing what there is to see. That heritage is two-fold. One part has to do with the adult's concept of childhood which colors his own relationship to children, and affects what he will expect to see. The other has to do with the nature of schooling and adult expectations for learning, which again affects what one expects to see. As teachers you are

well aware that socio-political and religious history has left us two very different perceptions of people, and by inference of children, the one as inner-directed, inner-motivated and responsible for self; the other as helpless, dependent on fate, and subject to manipulation and control. The second of these has long been applied to children and reflects the way we were brought up and taught at school. What we have all inherited, whether we are conscious of it or not, is an assumption about children which is limited because it grows out of an adult leadership role of evaluating, judging, directing and controlling children's "proper" activity and learning and not out of a study of children as they see themselves. The second part of our heritage is an interpretation of worthwhile learning as mainly verbal and academic. Even early childhood teachers, let alone others, retain a sneaky feeling that to read is a more prestigious achievement than to paint, to count is a more valued competency than to sing, and that the real mark of distinction in a child is his academic performance. This, like his very self, can be evaluated, judged, directed and controlled according to a predetermined set of objectives and goals.

It is the predetermined expectations growing out of our assumption of a rightful role as adults to judge, direct and control that interfere with perceiving children as they are.

Let me read two records of the same five year old child. They were based on daily observations, but I will read the summary drawn from these.

> Robin is able and interested in academic work and seems to follow this interest independently as seen in making a fan to demonstrate moving air for science, reading the writing in regular alphabet on a toy, reading record cover in regular alphabet, seeing a mistake on book title, during freeplay writing "fascinated" in i/t/a on board, adding more sentences to writing paper and, according to his mother, changing to regular alphabet on his own. He reads very well and is advanced in reading to the class.
>
> Robin appears in the academics to be quick and accurate. He makes the fan quickly and explains matter of factly. He quickly and correctly answers questions on numbers after asking teacher a question when "stuck". Two writing papers were described as accurate

and he reads books to teachers quickly and perfectly. He writes about play steadily and it is accurate and original.

Robin's expression is often serious and intense as seen while making fan, brows knit when reading letters on toy, intense with tongue on lip writing on board, tongue on lip while writing about play.

This observation recorded what the observer was looking for. Academic achievement in a five year old is pretty outstanding, and in today's pressured environment, it was important to find.

But here is another record of Robin. Here too the biases of the observer show, but they are a different set of biases. This record is about Robin worrying.

Robin often appears worried, concerned and anxious about peers' and adults' reactions to a mistake he may have made. Several times he became afraid that the teacher would be mad at a mess he'd made once with a cookie and twice with crayons. Another time Robin was afraid Miss B. and his mother would be mad that he'd accepted batman cards from a peer. Robin is worried when criticized by Bill for squeezing in line and by Miss B. for not buttoning his coat and also when his father suggests he hang leggings he's forgotten.

Several times Robin is anxious when something is out of his sight or grasp as yesterday's painting he can't find, when his father hasn't come to the roof yet, when Miss B. and Bill have a secret he hasn't heard and when a friend hasn't arrived at school yet. Also he worriedly tells me his parents may leave him for a weekend with his siblings who tease him.

Three times in the record he's worried if something is good or not - once he asks a peer if his painting is good and the teacher if he's good at anything in the play and still another time if his name is written well.

At these times labelled "Worrying" Robin is described as looking apprehensive, agitated, worried, anxious, upset and frowning, shivering all over, concerned, tears in eyes, his voice sad, brows knit, nervous, disorientated, shaky voice, distressed face and plaintive voice. He worries quite often.

Suppose the observer had concentrated only on the achievements of this child? Would that have told us all there was to know? By what chance did the same observer record emotional responses, allowing us to see at what cost Robin was being so outstandingly successful at age five?

But the student who took this record knew young children, and was not limited in her observations by a set of expectations related only to adult values,

biases, expectations or standards.

In point of fact, observations of children must begin without any preconceived notions of what one ought to find or will find. An open mind ready to accept anything that is there to see, without judgment, is a first prerequisite. And yet that is hard to achieve, even for people who defy the traditionally restrictive view of children and their learning, and who consider themselves tolerant, friendly, open and accepting teachers. Without in any way impugning the integrity and good will of committed and sincere teachers, let me point to the human characteristics we all share that affect our powers to see children as they are.

It is a strength in human response to quickly and almost unconsciously pick up clues to other people's behavior so that we can react. The anguished expression of a person in pain is one we recognize and respond to with sympathy or help. The joyous, unrestrained laughter of another is contagious and we share it willingly even if we ourselves were not involved in what caused the mirth to begin with. We respond to the mood of others in our homes and classrooms with a quick "What's bugging you?" or "Something nice happened, I can see that" or "You look like the cat that swallowed the cream!" This quick sizing up of another's mood, motivation, pain or pleasure is an asset, and one that helps us in our observations of children. We recognize the look of mischief in someone's face and posture and prepare for it; we note the fear in someone's eyes and shoulders and extend a supportive arm; we feel the impatience in someone's hands and feet and offer a diversion. But we are also culture bound in what we see, and interpret incorrectly as often as not. E.g. Many of us learned early not to trust people with blue eyes because they are false; to be wary of redheads because they have tempers; to be suspicious of skins black or white if you are the other color, to mistrust the politeness of white-anglo-saxons because it conceals more than it reveals, to expect boys to be active and girls

to be passive, to expect girls to be helpful and boys to be indifferent to detail, to expect Jews to be smart and Chinese to be incrutable - and so on.

With much effort and education, many of us have overcome these conventional stereotypic reactions and we are sure we accept all children for themselves. But for each of us there are personal associations that continue to influence us in our reactions to people. There is the faculty member at a college who called me Ruth for months until I asked her whether she had known a Dorothy whom she disliked - and she had. Since she liked me, I couldn't possibly be a Dorothy! There is the little boy with the too familiar look of a boy in our childhood who was a tease. There is the little girl, be she sensitive, delicate, sloppy, tom-boyish, helpless, an isolate, or a leader who is so much like we were at her age that we feel sure we understand her. There is the boy or girl whose hair curls like our sister's or brothers's, whose toes point inward like the boy or girl we loved in third grade, or whose appealing eyes makes us melt each time he or she turns our way. We all have our favorite children; and we all have children we can't stand. Do we see these children clearly? An anecdote about a very successful 2nd grade teacher will clarify this personal projection. The teacher in question was outstanding for her ability to integrate every child into a cohesive, socially united class, even unto a somewhat retarded child and a child who was under treatment as a constitutional schizophrenic. In one way or another she found the places where every child could function and relate as best as he could to others. One day her director came in to visit, and as they stood and chatted, one of the little girls edged close and stood almost touching the teacher, taking everything in with intense absorption. The teacher suddenly turned on the child and said sharply with an edge of fury, "Ellen, you go about your business. If I am talking to Mrs. C. you do not have to be in on it. You do not have to know everything." The director was surprised at the strength of feeling toward this little

PS 004481

girl in view of the extraordinary sensitivity of this teacher toward children in difficulty. She discussed the episode with the teacher, since the child's eavesdropping in her view did not call for that degree of anger. The clue lay in the teacher's response to Ellen's general behavior. She was one of the children who ran things in that class. She was actively interested in everybody and everything and made suggestions to all, the kind of child who would be president some day of the ladies auxiliary. Her style did not amuse her teacher, who confessed, "When I was at college I was always on the fringe. I hated the in-group. They were snobs and cliquish. I can't stand people like that." Ellen, for this teacher, was too much like the "superior" girls at school. So both her positive attitude toward the potential rejects in her class and her negative attitude toward an in-group leader aroused her feelings to a point of exaggerated action.

Because we are all human, we tend to bring ourselves into our observations of children in more ways than we realize. E.g. Age and physical well-being influence our perception of what children do. A mother I know who encouraged her young children to climb heights with daring and bravery, found herself many years later quivering with fear when her neighbor's children did the same thing. She wondered why she had undergone such a change, and recognized suddenly that the years had not dealt kindly with her. She had developed arthritis fairly young and physical movement came hard to her. In her pre-arthritic state she had projected the trust of her own body and her sense of personal competency in coping with physical challenge onto the children. But at a stage in her life when she could not imagine herself climbing with feelings of security about her safety, she projected that onto the children too, although her mind told her that climbing was good for children. The way in which our upbringing shaped our personal morality and concepts of good and bad causes us to project values onto children's behavior . As has been indicated by Dr. Cawake and Dr. Halverson, young children's sense of self is rooted in the body. They

think, feel and respond in a bodily way. Words are secondary; guilt and shame do not operate with too much restrictive effectiveness just yet. What is a well brought up teacher observing when she sees young children use their backsides to 'thumb' noses at someone, jeer most unbecomingly at the person they are taunting with a rhythmic bounce of the buttocks that is hardly in good taste, even though effective? Can she see that for what it is? Does she see vulgarity, or does she see a child fighting back with the best weapons at hand? Young children often run wildly and to no apparent purpose except the use of energy. Are we passing judgment on that behavior when we describe it as aimless or are we being objectively descriptive?

Let me share an anecdote with you in which the teacher's moral reactions to children's behavior caused her to lose all sense of perspective about children and certainly her sense of humor. The episode involved one of my own children, grown now, about whom I was called to school the year he was in second grade and six and one-half years old in accordance with the admission dates of that time. The teacher was convinced he was in need of psychiatric attention because he lied, and this was the story she told me to prove her point. It seems that this child had tottered into his classroom one morning dramatically bent over a thin cane of the type bought at the circus. He wobbled his cane and held his back as he made his way in until the teacher noticed him and said sharply, "What are you doing with that cane?" My six and one-half year old son straightened up and answered, "My legs hurt." The teacher replied, "If your legs hurt, tell your mother to take you to the doctor." "I did", the child answered, "and the doctor told me to use a cane." Now in truth, my son had complained about pains in his legs and I had taken him to the doctor. The doctor said she could find nothing wrong but suspected he was sitting too long at a school desk and was finding that hard to take. Incidentally, although I walked this child to school I never saw the cane, which must have been hidden in his pants leg, so he had planned his strategy well! But this was the episode that caused a teacher whose

knowledge of childhood was confined to the expectation that anything short of complete obedience is a sin, to decide that this utterly childish prank was a sign of serious disturbance. For the moment, I am not discussing how to deal with unacceptable, disruptive, or mischievous behavior. I am pointing to the limitations that affect what we see.

We have a tendency to see in children's behavior what we ourselves expect to see, whether that is good or bad for a specific child, for that male or female child, for that black, white, Christian, Jewish or Moslem child, for that neat, clean, pretty child, or that smelly, nose-running, unappetizing-looking child. We are human and we are vulnerable. Before we can observe children to see what there is to see, we must recognize the biases within ourselves, especially by which we pass judgment and make decisions about children. There are biases about which we are often unaware, biases about appearance, about good and bad, about expectations and about what makes us comfortable or uncomfortable about what children do. What is natural and seems right may be the result of what was taught to us as right and wrong at home. There are many kinds of homes, but without our realizing it, we are likely to interpret what children do, in the light of our homes, when in fact we must learn to see what they do in terms of the meaning to themselves. A question we must all ask of ourselves as we begin to observe is "What are my biases? What are the kinds of behavior that make me forgive a child for anything? What are the kinds I cannot stand?"

Information that is useful to a teacher's understanding is information seen through the eyes of a child and not through the eyes of an adult. Children's behavior is spontaneous, impulsive, emotionally spurred, changeable, unpredictable and honest. From their point of view it is not mature or immature, civilized or primitive, moral or immoral, at standard or below. It simply is, for adults to be able to offer children standards of acceptable vs unacceptable, social vs anti-social, mature vs immature, we have got to see their behavior first as they mean it, and only secondarily as we interpret it by adult standards.

Just as we are the product of countless episodes of interaction with

our relatives, peers, teachers, the objective world, our national attitudes and national history among many other factors, so children too are the products of whatever they have experienced and to which they have brought the uniqueness of their own inborn endowments. Consequently, anything any one does , adult or child,is in a way a logical outcome of the interaction between the individual and the special circumstances in which he finds himself at any given moment. The reflex to a ball flying at us could be to duck or to reach depending on our height, our experience with balls and our attention, of the moment, but in either case the reaction would be spontaneous, natural and right, given our unique and personal history of experience. The teacher who responds with "You clumsy oaf, couldn't you do better?" is coloring her perception of the child with a judgment that reveals her disappointment and condemnation but not her objective observation of what actually took place, and certainly not the meaning of the experience to the child himself.

Here is a record of a child in which objective recording without opinion reveals two possible interpretations: the moral view of the adult, and the implication of what the child felt.

> Kim, a four and one-half year old, sat in the group directly in front of Mr. X, one elbow on her knee, hand under chin and a bored expression on her face. Mr. X exclaimed, "Kim, if you had a purple crayon, what would you draw?" Kim replied aggressively, "It's none of your business." Mr. X countered, "Oh! That's a silly answer, I know someone can give me a better answer." Sara waving her hand high above the others shouted, " I know what I would make. A house, that's what I would make." David interposed, "I would make a face." Tony: "I would make a book." Kim intruded hastily, "I would make a monster, stupid!" There was no response from Mr. X. A few minutes passed, and Kim shouted, "Mr. X, your hair is ugly. You have stupid hair."

If one saw what Kim did judgmentally, one would call her uncooperative, fresh, and rude. But listen to this next observation of Kim, in a totally different situation, when she returned to school after an illness.

> Kim entered the room with her father after being ill for several days. She stood rigidly in front of him with a finger in her mouth. Her eyes wandered about the room and her lips were taut. Several children were undressing and others were playing at the far end of the room.

Kim's father leaned forward slightly and remonstrated with Kim, "What's the matter -- Go on in." No response. A few minutes passed, then David very pleasantly exclaimed, "Hello Kim." No response. The teacher announced, "Look! Kim's back." Several children gathered around Kim, but Kim did not respond to any of them. She stood rather tense as her father took off her hat, coat, and top sweater. After her belongings were placed in her box, her father gave her a few gentle pats on the chin before leaving the room. No response. The teacher went directly over to Kim and placed her arms around her and sat her in her lap. David came over and said hello again. No response; Kim just glared at him. Teacher, "David, Kim's been out of school for awhile, and she must get used to being back in school." As Kim sat on the teacher's lap, a girl passed by playing with a slinker. Kim said smiling "I have a slinker." The teacher smiled and gave her a big squeeze. A few minutes passed. Kim said, matter-of-factly "I want to go to Miss X's room." Teacher, "O.K., but only for a little while." As she leaped down Kim said, "I'll be right back," and strolled toward the door.....

A few minutes passed. Kim returned to the room, and resumed her position on the teacher's lap. She sat quietly swinging her arms and legs, intently observing the other children with a finger in her mouth. She whispered something to the teacher. She dashed out the door again... and returned in a short while. She wandered around the room,,joining several children who were watching Gretchen as she fed the guinea pig. A few minutes later Kim rushed over to the teacher. Excitedly she said, "Give me some lettuce." The teacher gave her the lettuce. Kim rushed back to the guinea pig's cage, pushed Gretchen aside and dropped her lettuce in the cage slowly. Teacher, "Children it's roof time." "Please get your coats and hats." Kim skipped over to her cubby. "Hey, somebody put a glove in my box," She shouted. Teacher, "I think that glove belongs to your mother." Kim, (shaking her head) rather firmly replied, "No-00-00, that's not my mother's glove." Teacher, "leave it in your box until we check with her." Reluctantly Kim dropped the glove back into her box, then picked her coat up. Carefully, she placed the coat on the floor in the opposite direction of her body. She bent over and placed her right arm into the sleeve of the coat and then she left. Quickly, she placed the coat across her head, walked directly over to the teacher to do the coat button, then ambled happily toward the door.

This time we see a child who is slow in reentering a group situation, even though it is a familiar one. The rigidity of her body and the finger in her mouth indicates her tension and anxiety. She sizes the situation up with her eyes and does not respond to her father's remonstrance or children's welcome. She allows her father to remove her clothes with no effort to help him. She accepts the teacher's warmth but remains cold to children. Suddenly she finds her point of contact -- the slinker. In time, and with no prodding, she makes her first gesture outward. Her sortie is brief and she returns to the comfort of an adult.

Eventually she is a full-bodied participant, free and exultant, with it.

Now if we look again at the first observation, we see a Kim who is challenged by an unexpected, new, demand and becomes defensive. She collects herself and finds her answer, but she is still carrying the edges of her defensiveness. When the adult does not respond to her belated effort, she insults him. It's all very logical from her point of view.

All behavior is caused by identifiable factors and therefore natural to the child. In his eyes, it is not good or bad; it just is his thing. As teachers, we must present standards of acceptable and unacceptable behavior to children, and make clear to them what will and what will not be allowed. But in observing children for the sake of finding out more about them, we are really collecting data in a small piece of research. Judgment of all kinds must be held in abeyance until the evidence is in, because what looks like the same behavior can mean many different things to different children. Every child really is unique, and one of the purposes that is served by the objective collecting of data is the deepening of a teacher's awareness of the ways in which any individual is unique. This deepening is possible to the extent that the pertinent clues inherent in behavior are selected, that the teacher holds off on an assessment of what it means until a lot of evidence is in, and then records the special, individual way in which a child does what he does.

In early childhood, body movement is the major language of expression. Verbal language is a secondary, inadequate accompaniment. In early childhood, Movement, gesture and expression tell more about the meaning of children's behavior to themselves than their words, and teachers must learn to read their body movement. Children are physical. Their bodies have not yet been assigned to the secondary position it holds for the adult. Listen to this observation of a seven year old, and see what it says about his recognition and acceptance of authority and routines...

It is shortly before dismissal time for lunch in a second grade class-

room. The teacher, following a daily routine, tells the children that it is time to get ready for lunch so they should sit at their desks and be quiet.

John darts to his chair, throws himself into it, and then snaps into an exaggerated military posture, shoulders back, chest out, ramrod spine, hands rigidly folded. He maintains this for about two seconds, then jumps to his feet, sprawls forward over his desk and talks animatedly to George.

The teacher tells John to sit in his seat. As though a button has been pressed, John snaps into his military position and holds it for a few seconds. He then relaxes, turns loosely in his seat and rocks the chair back and forth. He sings a snatch of song in a happy loud voice, then claps his hands over his mouth, eyes dancing.

The teacher gives the command to go to the coat closet. John leaps to his feet, clapping his hands twice with exhuberance. He darts toward the closet, stopping an instant on the way to feel the paint on an easel picture.

As he reaches for his jacket, he deliberately and good humoredly knocks George with his elbow. Standing in front of the line of hooks and blocking the other children, he slides into his jacket in a continuous and economical motion, causing his hood to slide on automatically as he lowers his arms.

The first one dressed, John edges through the group gathered at the closet, giving George another fiendly bump as he goes. He swings across the room toward the door, making boxing motions in the air and singing in a loud voice. He is first in line to leave.

And listen to this one and hear what it says about a child's feelings about his capacity to cope, and his dependency, first on the teacher and then on the material he is working on.

The ten girls and nine boys in Mrs. D;s second grade classroom are all busy rolling, pounding, and squeezing clay. As they work, each seems to exude beatific expressions of joy. All except one, that is.

John is all alone at his table. The other children are working two or three at a table. Mrs. D. is moving about as the children work. She stops at one table to answer questions from several children. As she stops at the table, John calls out to her, "Mrs. D.! come here!" Mrs. D. answers, "just a minute, John." John seems very annoyed and begins to pound very heavily on the ball of clay which is on the table.

John, a chubby, dark complexioned, bright-eyed boy, pauses for a moment, looks briefly in Mrs. D's direction and yells out again, "Mrs.D. will you please come over here!" He continues to pound on the clay. He begins working furiously. He rolls the clay, he squeezes it frantically. At the same time, he begins to stare coldly at the clay. He speaks to the clay in a soft but vicious voice, "you have got to make me a dog." He begins to pound again. Then, in a low commanding tone, he says, "If you don't make me a dog, I will burst you open." The boy

> stands up, takes the clay in his hands and begins gently shaping it into a form. He sits down and calmly begins rolling the clay on the table. After a few minutes, Mrs. D. comes over. John gives her a wide smile, holds up his shape and says, "See my dog, how do you like him?" Mrs. D. smiles her approval, and all seems right with John.

Children's movement is a language - a language of action in which various intentions and bodily and mental effort appear in coherent order, if one but looks to see. In part children's movement is related to developmental stage, from which one can see competency, experimentation, testing and attitude toward self as well as sheer physical ability. And in part it is a motivational, social and emotional response expressed in personal style.

It is not what a child does, but <u>how he does it</u> that gives us the insight into him as a person. If we look at the final product, only, as in Robin's record of achievement read at the beginning, we miss how Robin came to achieve. The process by which a child copes with life is the true measure of that child, of which the product is one small part, and a part that can mean many different things on different occasions.

Thoroughly integrated as total, whole persons, their tempo, posture, movement of limbs and gestures, tilt of their heads, the thrust of their chest, their eyes, their brows, their mouths, their voices all give clues to the quality of what they feel and mean. Each of the separate pieces of them can be described, but it is the cumulative whole that tells the tale. In their walk one can see pride, caution, timidity, abandon, self-effacement or strength. Their chests and shoulders push forward to make an impact on the air about them and on the world, or recede in self-denial or fear. Their legs can be stolid, stiff, fleet, springy, bouncy, rubbery or firm. Their arms can express tightness and withdrawal as they hug them tight to their sides, or freedom and joy as they fling them open wide to embrace the universe. Their eyes can be frightened, luminous, joyous, laughing, pleading, closed, open wide, or full of curiosity. Their bodily selves are their real selves and if we learn to read body language we will be reading children.